

S. B. Levin, *Plato's Rivalry with Medicine. A Struggle and its Dissolution*,

Oxford University Press,
New York 2014, 299 pp, £42.00.

Maria Luisa Garofalo

Università di Roma La Sapienza
mluisa.garofalo@gmail.com

The identification of a technical model that was epistemologically valuable and could represent the foundations of his philosophical doctrine was among Plato's main concerns. The Platonic production, in fact, often deals with the enquiry about the principles characterising a *technē* as opposed to the empirical praxis. The confrontation Plato had with the *technai* of his time, including their epistemological premises and their status, nurtured his production from his early writings until the very last ones. Medicine plays a particularly important role in this framework. This discipline, in fact, frequently represents a term of comparison, and Plato's approach to it has not always been the same. Undoubtedly, the medical inquiries had an important influence on Plato's epistemological and political thought, although his interpretation of the medical tradition was not completely faithful to the doctrines and aims of their authors.

Susan B. Levin's new book, *Plato's Rivalry with Medicine: A Struggle and its Dissolution* belongs to those studies dedicated to the analysis of the relationship standing between Plato's doctrine and the 'technical' models of Antiquity, and aims to define the philosopher's position regarding the medical art. In the introduction, the Author explains how, from her point of view, scholars have very often underestimated the role played by medicine and by its epistemological paradigm in the development of Platonic philosophy. As a consequence, the aim that Levin attributes to her volume is to analyse the relationship between Plato's thought and the medical art according to the different conceptions that appear in the dialogues. Hence, the volume represents the reconstruction of Plato's views on medicine and their evolution, starting from the early dialogues until those composed towards the end of his career. The Author constantly highlights the links that

connect the different dialogues, thanks to a broader and systematic view of the subject matter, that includes all the variations that the Platonic doctrine regarding the *technai*, and more specifically medicine, underwent.

The first two chapters of the volume are dedicated to the *Gorgias*. They respectively deal with the theme of the Good and the body-soul relationship (chapter I), and the double relationship existing between philosophy and medicine (chapter II). First, Levin points out the positive consideration Plato took medicine into compared to rhetoric, and then she highlights the limits he attributes to it, as epistemologically weaker than philosophy. Levin then leads her attention towards other dialogues: the *Symposium*, and in particular the character of the physician Eryximachus (chapter III); the *Republic* and the critique moved towards medicine as a discipline that cannot be considered as a *techne* (chapter IV); the *Statesman*, in which the political and social consequences of medicine are emphasized (chapter V); and the *Laws*, that introduces a solution to the opposition between philosophy and medicine (chapter VI). The last chapter proposes an interpretation of the Platonic inheritance in relations to contemporary bioethics, with particular stress on the concept of *paideia*.

Let's now move closer to some crucial themes of the volume. As already mentioned, the main focus of the volume is to analyse the several points of view on *iatriche techne* that appear in the *Corpus Platonicum*, and to underline its epistemological as well as its political implications. Furthermore, Levin aims to clarify both the merits that led Plato to the appreciation of the medical art, and also the reasons leading him to reject medicine as a technical model.

In her description, the Author places great emphasis on the famous distinction between *techne* and *empeiria*, together with the resulting possibility to distinguish what *episteme*

is, from what it is not: "The dialogue's highly normative concept of *techne* gives Plato, at a stroke, a philosophical lens through which to (1) delineate what activities do and do not merit pursuit (*technai* and *empeiriai* respectively), and (2) defend hierarchical claims about *technai* vis-à-vis one another" (cf. p. 7). In other words, in the *Gorgias*, Plato unequivocally presents the definition of *techne*, in order to be able to distinguish the real *technai* from empirical practices lacking any kind of causal explanation. Thanks to such approach, it will be possible to distance philosophy from sophistic rhetoric, due to the different epistemological status of the two disciplines.

The thorough analysis of the *Gorgias* allows Levin to identify a double characterisation of medicine. In a way, in fact, medicine's method is opposed to that of the sophistic rhetoric, as it follows the conception of competence, often evoked by Plato. Medicine has an object, which is the body, and has knowledge of the causal relationships that govern it. In order to make his point clear, Plato compares it to cookery, which is dedicated to the body as well, but merely to the hedonistic aspect, aimed at flattering its beneficiary and not at maintaining health. In conclusion, medicine is conceived as an art aspiring to a higher Good: the health of the body. In this way, medicine becomes a powerful ally in the fight against rhetoric, the art of persuasion, thanks to the knowledge on the causes altering the bodily *eukrasia* and, then, the remedy that can restore it (in this framework, diagnosis and prognosis, two elements of Hippocratic medicine are crucial).

The digression the Author proposes regarding the influence exerted by the Hippocratic literature on the Platonic concept of medicine is very interesting (pp. 42-53). The contribution of texts such as *Ancient Medicine; Airs, Waters and Places; Regimen* and other treatises of the

Hippocratic Corpus is pivotal in the definition of medicine as a *technē*, thanks to the identification of some elements that characterize the medical art, and to the refusal of the role played by *tyche* in the context of their professional praxis. Hence, Plato is highly indebted with the Hippocratic medicine, as Levin points out. Nonetheless, one great merit has to be acknowledged to Plato: that of the systematisation of the doctrines scattered all over the Hippocratic medical treatises.

On the other hand, though, Plato did not accept that medicine could be recognized as the technical model *par excellence*. Such impossibility derives from the fact that, being an art dedicated to the body, it cannot entail the higher goods –*agatha*– as those only pertain to the domain of the *psyche* (cf. p. 41 e ff). In line with this point of view, the Author affirms: «In the *Republic*, Plato cashes out the implications for medicine of the flaws the *Symposium* diagnosed in its views of *physis* and *eudaimonia*. The *Republic* circumscribes the terrain of medicine such that lifestyle, to which right handling of the Big Three is central, becomes instead the province of philosophy» (p. 110).

A different point of view is presented in the *Laws*, where the distinction between the free and the slave physician implies a new openness towards medicine. In fact, Plato's critique here is directed only to those who learn the medical art by the sole means of experience. From such practitioners, he distinguishes the physicians who can explain phenomena – *logon didonai* – and have deep knowledge of their art and its method and procedures. Both medicine and the physician then gain back their value and recognition, as confirmed by Plato in book IX of the *Laws*, when he has the Athenian stranger affirm: «For of this you may be very sure, that if one of those empirical physicians, who practice medicine without science, were to come upon

the gentleman physician talking to his gentleman patient, and using the language almost of philosophy, beginning at the beginning of the disease and discoursing about the whole nature of the body, he would burst into a hearty laugh» (cf. 857c-d). As in the *Gorgias*, then, medicine's characterization establishes a comparison that brings medicine closer to philosophy, strengthening Plato's consideration of this discipline.

Levin herself admits that the analysis of the relationship between philosophy and medicine has been restricted to the dialogues we have briefly mentioned so far, while it does not include, for example, the *Phaedrus* or the *Timaeus*, where Plato's opinion on medicine appears modified from his early writings, but also opposed as the one supported in the *Republic*. It would have probably been interesting to include a section dedicated to these dialogues in order to obtain a more complete picture of the complex Platonic consideration about the *technai*. In particular, not much attention is dedicated to the different attitudes Plato demonstrates in regards to medicine, as for example in the case of the *Phaedrus*, where he states that the method of medicine and the good rhetoric (i.e. philosophy) is more or less the same, as both disciplines rely on *synagoge* and *diairesis* (*Phaedr.* 270b).

Overall, Levin's volume contributes to livelying up the discussion about the influence medicine exerted on the development of Platonic philosophy by proposing an interpretation that, thanks to a diachronic analysis of his dialogue, resolves tensions and fluctuations of Plato's position regarding medicine.